

## **Bayers Rd Widening: chance for new direction**

Once in a while we get a great opportunity to really think about a new direction for Halifax Regional Municipality: will we continue down our current path of widening major arterial roads or will we embark on an ambitious and progressive program of supporting sustainable transportation- public transit, cycling infrastructure, commuter rail, ferry service and sidewalks.

Two decisions before Regional Council this fall will set the direction for this debate : the recommendations to accept the Road Network Functional Plan that includes the planned widening of Bayers Rd and the proposed establishment of a Transportation Reserve Corridor on Bayers Rd that will define the lines where the future widening would take place.

Two compelling reasons for changing to a sustainable transportation agenda are the economics of road widening and the necessity of strengthening the urban core as a place to live.

The economics of road widenings are complex. Road construction and maintenance are staggeringly huge financial commitments. The projected costs in 2009 dollars for the Bayers Rd widening (CN overpass to Windsor St) are \$16 million for construction and \$5 million for land acquisition. The projected costs for the whole Highway 102/Bayers Rd widening is \$292 million, not including land acquisition. Costs of road construction are hard to predict as we have just seen with the \$5 million dollar over expenditure of the Washmill Court Underpass.

With steadily increasing oil prices, it does not make economic sense to be planning road widenings when most employees may not be able to afford to travel in a private car. When we choose this direction we severely limit our ability to ensure reliable transportation options for our economy in the future.

New and widened roads may not meet the needs of future commuters, but we seldom challenge ourselves to look at other options. Instead we often bemoan the expense of public transit as a subsidy benefitting just a few and treat active transportation as a frill. At the household level, every time a resident chooses not to own a car or not to use one, it means more disposable income in their pocket to support other economic activity in our municipality. The real costs of subsidizing the private car at a community and personal level rarely enters the debate.

Central to the future planning direction of HRM is to make our community more sustainable. One important step in achieving this is to encourage more people to live in the urban core – this saves costs since it maximizes the use of existing infrastructure and it reduces our overall environmental footprint. The key phrase describing this goal is building vibrant, affordable, livable communities where people live, work and play.

While there are many issues that affect where people live including housing affordability, expanding arterial roads does not in any way make urban areas more attractive for potential residents. Studies have shown that road widenings that allow more car traffic only increase the number of cars on the road. More cars means more congestion, more need for parking, more shortcutting through residential neighbourhoods, more negative impacts on the environment and human health.

There appears to be two contradictory planning frameworks in HRM – one being driven by a vision for sustainable and balanced growth that promotes vibrant, well planned, compact, healthy communities and one being driven by a fear of congestion and support for existing transportation patterns based in

the previous century. These diverging planning directions have not been discussed let alone seriously acknowledged by staff or council.

Municipalities all over the world are facing the same issues – how to help people travel in ways that are efficient, environmentally friendly, and respond to rapidly changing economic realities. So the question for HRM is what can we do differently to have more success at this? Some answers include:

Increase investment in public transit projects that would move public transit to new levels of service and reliability – more frequent bus service on high demand routes, new fare box technology that allow swipe cards, real-time arrival information, and a dedicated bus lane onto the peninsula.

Invest in an aggressive program to seriously advance work on bike lanes, new sidewalk development, and trail linkages – provide the much needed dollars to develop a viable active transportation network that will connect home and work. Last spring, the Active Transportation Advisory Committee presented Five Big Moves for Active Transportation in HRM to Regional Council with a request for \$10 million dollars over five years – the plans are there, the funding is not.

Commit to pursue all options for sustainable transportation such as increased ferry service and commuter rail so that we can fully understand possible new and expanded directions.

Regional Council will be making a decision in September to continue with the Bayers Rd widening project as a long term project for HRM. If you are concerned about this direction now is the time to contact your councillor. And in an upcoming election year, what better opportunity to be talking about vision, budget priorities and creative solutions on an issue as vital as helping people move around our municipality. This is not just about saying no to the Bayers Rd widening, it is about saying yes to sustainable transportation.